

COMPOSER COGNOSCENTI

A discerning, opinionated group of soundtrack mavens weighs in with its choices for the year's best scores

By Jeff Bond



Summer and holiday-season blockbusters, year-end "prestige pictures" and one composer's historic output have made the 2005 best-score Oscar race one of the most competitive in memory.

Looming over everything else is John Williams' contribution of four scores. His work on Sony's "Memoirs of a Geisha" already has earned a Golden Globe nomination, and Fox's "Star Wars: Episode III — Revenge of the Sith" and Paramount's "War of the Worlds" have given him the opportunity to fashion a fascinating career bookend to the original "Star Wars" and "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," the pair of 1977 films that launched the veteran composer into the stratosphere. Then there is Williams' score to Steven Spielberg's Universal drama "Munich," a subtler work that centers on subject matter heavy enough to guarantee awards attention.

Williams stepped out of the Harry Potter cycle, allowing Patrick Doyle to step in on Warner Bros. Pictures' "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" and compete with two other late-season blockbusters: Buena Vista's "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch & the Wardrobe," scored by Harry Gregson-Williams, and Peter Jackson's Universal actioner "King Kong," which showcases a thrilling last-minute effort by James Newton Howard that already has earned a Golden Globe nom. Leading a pack of well-positioned year-end art films are Focus

Features' "Brokeback Mountain," which boasts a delicate, guitar-based score by Gustavo Santaolalla, and New Line's "A History of Violence," which continues director David Cronenberg's long association with composer Howard Shore.

Film composers often are too busy writing their own music to pay attention to their industry's big picture, but some individuals devote their careers to studying, writing about and sometimes selling movie music — and nothing gets past their discerning ears. In fact, it is nearly impossible to find composers who are willing to go on the record to discuss their favorite scores, so for straight talk, one must turn to those dedicated observers — or, in this case, listeners — who monitor the art form with an almost-religious sense of purpose.

To get a beat on the movers and shakers in the best-score Oscar race, The Hollywood Reporter tracked down these ever-opinionated experts — and, as usual, they had plenty to say. Much to our surprise, all of them agreed that this has been an especially memorable year for music in the movies.

"It has been a great year because it's sort of a wheelhouse year: Everyone's doing what their known for," says Doug Adams, who has lectured on film music at the Tribeca Film Festival and provided extensive notes for the new full-score CD release of Shore's "Fellowship of the Rings." "You've got John Williams doing a (George) Lucas film and a Spielberg



NINTH IN A SERIES

SONG & SCORE

HIGH FLIERS

Clockwise from left, Universal's "King Kong," Warner Bros. Pictures' "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" and Paramount's "War of the Worlds"



Focus Features' "Brokeback Mountain"



Lionsgate's "Crash"

film, you've got Danny Elfman doing two Tim Burton films, and you've got Howard Shore doing a Cronenberg film. It's like everyone's in their back yard this year, and the result is that there's a lot of good work."

Peter Kelly of the MovieMusic Co. and moviemusic.com leads a chorus of approval for Williams' 2005 output.

"What has interested me the most was where John Williams is in his career and where he went musically this year and how he surprised us in many ways," Kelly says. "The entire 'Star Wars' saga had a great wrap-up — the way the musical ideas came together — and the album makes for a great listen. In 'War of the Worlds,' people may have thought he was going to go in the direction of 'Star Wars' and that whole grand, symphonic sound, and he didn't go there. It's quite an interesting score that was the atmosphere of the movie; it was a surprise, but I wound up listening to that more than anything else this summer."

Adds Dan Goldwasser, whose Web site Soundtrack.net writes about most of Hollywood's major scoring sessions: "Certainly people are going to be looking at John Williams at Oscar time because every year, he does three to five scores, and at least three of them are worthy of accolades. In this case, 'Star Wars,' I felt, was a lackluster end to the series, and 'War of the Worlds,' while interesting at times, doesn't hold a candle to 'Memoirs of a Geisha.'"

Still, Filmtracks.com editor and owner Christian Clemmensen sees potential for multiple Academy mentions for Williams. "Don't be surprised if Williams surpasses his usual single Oscar nomination this year," he says.

According to Kelly, Williams' departure from the Potter series allowed Doyle to make the best of an opportunity.

"Patrick Doyle filled that void perfectly, I think," Kelly says. "He does some really wonderful things, and that score is becoming one of my favorites of the year through the lyrical writing that Doyle employs. It's not quite the magical stuff that Williams (does), but the books are turning away a little bit from that and more toward darker material."

Clemmensen echoes that praise.

"'Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire' may have, unfortunately, dismissed most of John Williams' themes, but it stands on its own as the pinnacle of Doyle's career," he says.

But Goldwasser adds a proviso.

"'Harry Potter' is a very good Patrick Doyle score; it's not a very good 'Harry Potter' score," he says. "(Williams' score to 2004's 'Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban') set the bar, and this doesn't reach it. I know people who disagree, though, and Doyle did deliver a fine score. If it were any other franchise, the score would be very good — but it doesn't have the intricacy of the Williams stuff and the little nuances Williams put into his scores."

For many of those interviewed, Danny Elfman was one of the year's heavy hitters with his two collaborations with director Tim Burton: "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" and "Corpse Bride," both Warners releases.

"'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' is a lot of fun — Elfman doing what he does best," says Dan Schweiger, who writes about movie music

for Venice magazine.

Adams feels that "Corpse Bride" flew under a lot of critics' radars.

"Elfman had a really strong year, and I think his work on 'Corpse Bride' was kind of overshadowed by 'Charlie' because that was such a big summer movie. I may have preferred the songs in 'Charlie,' but I think the score in 'Corpse Bride' is better; the whole score is very intelligently put together. It's a cool year for Elfman because he has always been 'Mr. Fantasy Melody,' with this fairy-tale aspect, and it's nice to hear that fantasy sound updated and also informed by all of the work he has done in the past few years."

Jonathan Kaplan, editor at Filmscoremonthly.com, says the best Elfman work is one yet to be heard by most filmgoers: "Both of Elfman's scores are Oscar-worthy, but his concert work, 'Serenda Schizophrenia,' which premiered earlier this year at (New York's) Carnegie Hall, is even better."

With two major epics scored in 2005, Harry Gregson-Williams caught the notice of several movie-score mavens.

"Harry Gregson-Williams has two really great scores: (Fox's) 'Kingdom of Heaven' — although it's kind of cut up in the film — and I really liked what he did in 'Chronicles of Narnia,'" Goldwasser says.

Schweiger notes that Gregson-Williams' efforts "take something that has been done to death and make it vital again. I really admired the simplicity he gave to 'Narnia.'"

Schweiger also expresses admiration for the year's offbeat fare.

"Two scores from John Ottman that I really liked were (Fox's) 'Hide and Seek' and (Warners') 'Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang'; 'Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang' had this retro feel to it that I really loved. I thought Alexandre Desplat's score to (Miramax's) 'Hostage' was excellent; for my money, Desplat is one of the best foreign transplant composers to come up in a long while, and he has a great sense for melody, especially in action or suspense."

Clemmensen notes that foreign composers added spice to 2005's output.

"The emergence of (Italy native) Dario Marianelli, with his stellar work for (Dimension's) 'The Brothers Grimm' and (Focus') 'Pride & Prejudice,' is a refreshing injection of European sensibility into an often-stale Hollywood environment," he says. "Another round of applause needs to be given for John Debney (also an Oscar contender for DreamWorks' 'Dreamer'), who continues to provide quality music for every genre with great professionalism and in significant quantity."

While most film-music cognoscenti are loath to predict who will be nominated this year, Kelly concludes that in order to predict Oscar recognition in the score category, follow the concert-hall connection.

"In terms of what the Academy has looked for over the last five or six years, there has always been some sort of classical connection, whether it be a composer predominantly working in the classical field doing a film score or a classical performer performing on a film score," he says. "You have that with 'Geisha' and (cellist) Yo-Yo Ma and (violinist) Itzhak Perlman, and you have (violinist) Joshua Bell on 'Dreamer.' I wouldn't be surprised if we saw some of these scores with a classical association recognized as some of the best of the year." ■